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Contra Forces in South in Disarray

U.S. Actions Said to Undercut Leader, Contribute to Failures

By Julia Preston
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica—As the Nicaraguan rebels embark on their most important U.S.-financed offensive to date against the leftist Sandinista government, the secondary guerrilla front operating in southern Nicaragua is in military disarray.

The failure to build an effective southern fighting flank resulted in part from actions by some Reagan administration officials to force leadership changes among the rebels there, according to administration, congressional and rebel sources as well as private rebel supporters in Central America and Washington.

Now, about 1,500 fighters at most are struggling to stay alive in the tropical forests of southern Nicaragua. They are short on guns, bullets and boots, and cut off from sanctuaries along the border with Costa Rica by Sandinista troops who control the border rivers.

By contrast, the Honduras-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force, with about 10,000 fighters, has infiltrated thousands of them into northern and central Nicaragua from their border base camps since December. All of the anti-Sandinista rebels are popularly called counterrevolutionaries, or contras.

Two southern front guerrilla commanders, "Navegante" and "Pedro Rafa," were jailed by Costa Rican immigration police. Another, "Omar," went to the United States for military training late last year and did not return.

Eden Pastora, the once-famed "Commander Zero," has given up the fight. Pastora's six remaining field commanders broke with him in May 1986. In late January they broke with their most recent allies, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, because they received no supplies from the \$100 million U.S. aid signed into law in October.

Moves to undercut Pastora by former National Security Council aide, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, and by CIA and embassy officials in

Central America came during the period, from October 1984 to October 1986, when the administration was barred by Congress from providing military aid or being involved in contra operations except to provide combat intelligence and training in special communications. These actions against Pastora aggravated existing factional feuding among the contras.

The saga of the southern front is mainly one in which U.S. officials withheld aid for Pastora and other contra fighters in that region. But it has had a major impact on the course of the war in Nicaragua during and after the period of the congressional ban on aid.

In mid-1986 CIA officers blocked delivery of a weapons shipment that private supporters had raised for Pastora, organizers of the effort said.

During the same period the CIA helped coordinate a weapons drop to Pastora's field commanders in Nicaragua to induce them to break with him, according to congressional sources in Washington and contra fighters in the region.

Also last year, U.S. officials in El Salvador discouraged some sympathetic Salvadoran military officers from assisting Pastora with small amounts of their surplus equipment, according to military sources there.

The recently recalled CIA station chief in Costa Rica, known as Tomas Castillo, sometimes circumvented normal operational channels to consult with top NSC and CIA officials about Pastora, congressional sources said.

Castillo was investigated and given early retirement because he helped to supply weapons to the contras from Costa Rica, sources said. North is also under investigation for violating the congressional prohibition.

Differing views of Pastora led to disputes between the State Department, which saw his defiant nationalism as an asset to the contras, and the CIA and NSC, which saw him as a security risk.

The conflicts among the contras in the south hinged on the problematic personality of Pastora: charming and gutsy, but also egomaniacal and reckless.

"He was a great inspirational leader," said one key administration official for Central America policy. "But it was never clear whether he would ever be a successful military leader."

A former Sandinista government official, who had quit in 1981, Pastora withdrew from guerrilla warfare in May 1986. By then Pastora's critics in the Reagan administration were calling him a communist, a dupe to Sandinista infiltrators and a drug trafficker.

"I'm the only *comandante* who can't afford to pay his rent," Pastora complained in a recent interview, for which he arrived barefoot. He charged: "Oliver North was the man who tried to destroy me."

Pastora's cocky relationship with the CIA soured because he was rebellious with CIA officers, some sources said, while he also failed to make inroads against the Sandinista Army in the crucial 1983 fighting season.

John Hull, an American conservative with a farm in northern Costa Rica, where many CIA-backed contra operations were staged, distrusted Pastora's politics and feuded with him. Joseph J. Yurko, a retired U.S. Army colonel who raises cattle in the same area of Costa Rica, said Hull became a channel to Washington for negative information about Pastora.

Hull was an associate of Rob Owen, a Washington lobbyist who assisted with the State Department's nonlethal aid program last year. Owen, who traveled to Central America and was in frequent contact with North, also disliked Pastora.

By early 1984, administration officials said, the CIA concluded that the southern front would fail militarily under Pastora and decided to edge him out of the fighting.

Yurko said that by mid-1984, when he attempted to collect some medicines and boots for Pastora in Washington, he found that even private conservative groups had been told by administration officials to stay away from him.

In late July 1985, North met in Washington with a Pastora lieutenant.

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ant, Adolfo (Popo) Chamorro. Afterward Chamorro said North offered him up to \$50,000 cash and a new flow of military supplies to break with Pastora and take over his fighters, according to Pastora and three other American and Nicaraguan sources who were close to the events.

The same week Chamorro, troubled by the offer, had a 10-minute meeting with Robert C. McFarlane, then national security adviser. Chamorro emerged to say McFarlane had confirmed North's offer, the sources said.

In an interview, Chamorro said it was "totally false" that he had met North or that any administration official had pressured him to break with Pastora.

But in the days after his trip to Washington, Chamorro gave one of his fighters North's private White House telephone number and the two agreed on a code name for referring to North: "the man in the uniform." Soon afterward Chamorro split with Pastora.

By spring of 1986 Pastora's few hundred remaining men were badly battered by Sandinista forces and he was out of guns. Retired Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, the contras' most prominent private fund raiser, gathered a planeload of rifles and ammunition and instructed a Pastora aide to wait for it at the Ilopango air base in San Salvador.

Singlaub said soon afterward that the shipment was "sabotaged" by U.S. officials "at an intermediate level." Singlaub told the Pastora aide the "U.S. officials" were from the CIA.

Some contra leaders said they believed shipments of U.S.-supplied equipment to the southern fighters were not delayed in an attempt to undermine the southern front but simply because of bureaucratic delays by the CIA.